



‘I hope you’re satisfied, Thatcher!’: Capturing the Zeitgeist of 1980s Britain in *The Young Ones*

In this model study of understanding history through popular culture, *The Young Ones* is revealed a valuable resource for understanding how socio-political and economic concerns were portrayed in the recent past.

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In a scene from ‘Cash,’ an episode in UK television comedy show *The Young Ones*, one of the characters is pretending to have a baby in a non-furnished house. In the panic of the impending ‘baby’ (the character, Vyvyan, is actually male), another character, Rick (the typical student lefty stereotype), yells:

We can’t, we haven’t got any money. Vyvyan’s baby will be a pauper. *Oliver Twist*, Geoffrey Dickens. Back to Victorian values. I hope you’re satisfied, Thatcher!¹

With scenes such as this, *The Young Ones* can be viewed *historically* and gives us insight into how Thatcherism and the 1980s were experienced by sections of British society. The show can be read as a text that portrays popular opinions about Thatcher’s Britain and satirises contemporary issues. In the scene mentioned above, as well as the delightful pun of mixing the author Charles Dickens with the Conservative MP Geoffrey Dickens, this exclamation by Rick echoes a theme that emerged around the time of 1983 General Election, when

Margaret Thatcher used the phrase ‘Victorian values’ to describe her political outlook:

The other day I appeared on a certain television programme. And I was asked whether I was trying to restore ‘Victorian values.’ I said straight out, yes I was. And I am . . . I believe that honesty and thrift and reliability and hard work and a sense of responsibility for your fellow men are not simply Victorian values. They do not get out of date.²

Using scenes such as these, I will argue that *The Young Ones* engagingly touches on many historical themes of Thatcherism and British society in the 1980s.

However, this does not mean that *The Young Ones* is an accurate reflection of the times per se – the show is obviously an over-the-top and surreal portrayal of student life in Thatcherite Britain. We, as historians and students of history, do not watch *The Young Ones* to observe an authentic depiction of life under Thatcherism as it actually was, but because we can see certain themes and concepts (important for

OPPOSITE: The Young Ones (L-R): Rick (Rik Mayall), Vyvyan (Adrian Edmondson), Neil (Nigel Planer) and Mike (Christopher Ryan).

- 1 'Cash,' episode 8, *The Young Ones*, 1984. All dialogue from *the Young Ones* has been sourced from this fanpage: <http://www.4q.dk/theyoungones.php>.
- 2 Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, 28 January 1983, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, <http://bit.ly/1s4h9t2>.
- 3 Heather Sutherland, 'Competitive Writing: BBC "Public Service" Television Light Entertainment and Comedy in the 1970s and 1980s,' *Journal of Screenwriting* 2, 1 (2010), 7-23.
- 4 Janine Utell, 'Negotiating Dissent: *The Adrian Mole Diaries* and *The Young Ones*,' in Ray B. Browne & Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr. (eds), *Popular Culture Values and the Arts: Essays on Elitism Versus Democratization* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 152-153.
- 5 Imogen Tyler, *Revolution Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 51-52.
- 6 John Ellis, 'Television and History,' *History Workshop Journal* 56, 1 (2003), 278.
- 7 See: Erin Bell, 'Television and Memory: History Programming and Contemporary Identities,' *Image & Narrative* 12, 2 (2011), 50-65; Mark Irwin, "'You Are Where You Are Sam - You've Got to Make the Best of It': Re-imagining, Renegotiating and Re-evaluating Memories of the Early 1970s in BBC's *Life on Mars*,' *Science, Fiction Film and Television* 6, 3 (Autumn 2013), 369-385; Carolyn Leslie, 'Historical Whodunnits: Location

understanding Thatcherism and 1980s Britain) depicted in the television show. The show works as an excellent demonstration of the zeitgeist of Britain under Margaret Thatcher. At the same time, it is factually inaccurate and stakes no claim to historical authenticity. This article will uncover some key themes of the Thatcherite zeitgeist and highlight how scenes from *The Young Ones* can reflect on how we understand more traditional historical concepts of Thatcherism and Britain in the 1980s.

The Rise of *The Young Ones* and Alternative Comedy in the 1980s

The Young Ones debuted on the BBC in November 1982, but was the result of a much longer development in British comedy, the evolution of the 'alternative comedy' scene that emerged in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the early 1980s. The 'alternative comedy' scene emerged as a reaction to the leading styles of comedy in 1970s Britain, primarily against the racist and sexist comedians who toured the country's working men's clubs (and informed sitcoms such as *Love Thy Neighbour*), but also in contrast with the Oxbridge dominated comedy of the BBC (*Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Goodies*) and the middle-class sitcoms of *The Good Life* and *The Manor Born*.

The scene revolved around two comedy clubs in London, The Comedy Store and The Comic Strip, but attracted several comedians from the north of England as well, primarily Alexei Sayle, a Liverpudlian Marxist who became MC at The Comedy Store, and 20th Century Coyote, a troupe from Manchester University featuring Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson (later the Dangerous Brothers). Most regular performers at these two clubs eventually worked on television, but the debut of 'alternative comedy' on television was, according to Heather Sutherland, the *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, which debuted on the BBC in 1979.³ Sutherland shows that the light entertainment and comedy divisions of the BBC, ITV and the emerging Channel 4 were in serious competition and motivated the BBC to 'green light' *The Young Ones*. Written by Mayall, Ben Elton and Lise Mayer, the show was cast and filmed quickly in late 1982. The cast was Mayall as Rick the student lefty, Edmondson as Vyvyan the punk, Nigel Planer as Neil the hippy and Christopher

Ryan as Mike the 'cool person.' Sayle would provide 'additional material' and appeared in most episodes as a member of the Balowski family.

Janine Utell has written that *The Young Ones* 'challenge[d] the hegemony of Thatcherism,' using laughter to highlight the 'profound ruptures and transformations in society' under Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership.⁴ Characters that espoused left-wing positions had been in British television comedies before, but had often been the focus of ridicule. Robert Lindsay's character of Wolfie in the late 1970s sitcom *Citizen Smith* was a stereotypical Marxist attempting to start a socialist revolution in suburban London via the Tooting Popular Front. Imogen Tyler has argued that 'while *Citizen Smith* was affectionate in its depiction of Wolfie,' it was unsympathetic to the political ideas he pronounced and through 'this comic infantilizing depiction of class struggle, unionism and left-wing militancy [we can see] a precursor to the popular stereotype of the "loony left" that emerged... in the 1980s.'⁵ On the other hand, *The Young Ones* were obviously critical of Thatcher and capitalism in the 1980s and sympathetic to the ideas of the left, but also willing to poke fun at the left for its sanctimonious tendencies.

Using Television as a Historical Source

John Ellis wrote, '[t]elevision has a threefold relationship with history: it "does history," it makes history and it has its own history.'⁶ Most scholarly discussions of television and history focuses on how it 'does history' – how historical events are portrayed in television shows, rather than on using television shows as a historical document or artefact. With contemporary shows, such as *Life on Mars*/*Ashes to Ashes*, *Mad Men*, *Downton Abbey* and the revised *Upstairs Downstairs* (as well as Australian shows such as *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*), indulging in the recent past (spanning from the 1920s to the 1980s), we have seen a wealth of scholarly discussion of historical representation, authenticity and how these shows coexist with popular memories of the eras.⁷ Many discussions of these shows discuss their aesthetic authenticity and fidelity to the historical era, as well as to the

historical 'truth' if based on actual events – what Natalie Zemon Davis has called 'the look of the past' or the 'soul' of the period.⁸ But any discussion of the historical authenticity of a television show (or film) must acknowledge that a 'true' representation of the past cannot occur.⁹ 'The attempt at reenactment' strived at by many television shows set in the past (as well as films in general) serves, as Emily Robinson has written, to highlight 'the ultimate impossibility of a satisfactory reenactment.'¹⁰

The usefulness of watching *The Young Ones* historically, as this article suggests, is that it can tell us about British society in the 1980s and the recognisable symbols of the early Thatcherite era. John Ellis has written that for the historian watching television:

It provides a means of grasping the texture of a particular moment in history, what it felt like to be alive at that moment, what the experience of the everyday might have been. From this can be extrapolated much about the material culture of the time.¹¹

The Young Ones does not show us Britain in the 1980s as it really was, but it is a depiction of how the 1980s were experienced. The references to phenomena such as unemployment, police racism, popular capitalism, student activism, sexism and class stratification in the show are taken from the real experience of living in Britain under Thatcher and depicted as icons/symbols that could be popularly recognised, but satirised to an unreal level. *The Young Ones* captures the *zeitgeist* of Britain in the early 1980s under Thatcherism by referring to many symbols of the era, but the context in which these symbols are represented is often contorted and pushed to the bounds of the absurd. The juxtaposition of the political and social commentary with surrealism and cartoon slapstick makes the show enjoyable to watch, while telling us much about the recent past – this is why historians should rewatch *The Young Ones*.

Neo-liberalism, Market Populism and the 'Get Rich' 1980s

In his autobiography, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson described Thatcherism as standing for:

free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax

cuts, nationalism, 'Victorian values.' ... privatisation and a dash of populism.¹²

This encouraged many to believe in the supremacy of the market and for laissez-faire capitalism to be embraced by many in the middle class, who invested heavily in property and shares. It also encouraged unprecedented consumerism and for 'cultural capital' to be obtained by many through the acquisition of consumer goods – what Stuart Hall described as 'consumer capitalism.'¹³ Getting rich quick (and showing it off) became a key idea among significant sections of the British population, often at the expense of others. *The Young Ones*, while critiquing Thatcher herself in several episodes, satirised other examples of neo-liberal capitalism and the 'get rich quick' hedonism of the 1980s.

In the first episode, 'Demolition,' the group are facing eviction from their home as the council have revoked the status of their house as protected housing for students. This reflects the effects of the Housing Act 1980, which saw councils across Britain sell off much of their council housing, many under the 'right to buy' scheme, but also to investors who started the process of property redevelopment that has fed several housing bubbles in the UK since the early 1980s. Richard Vinen notes that more than a million council homes were sold in the 1980s, but only around a sixth were bought by their tenants, with most homes bought by investors seeking to rent them.¹⁴ Renting was further subjected to neo-liberal ideals with the cutting of subsidies for council housing and the relaxing of rent controls.¹⁵ This exposed many lower-class Britons fell prey to the slum landlord, which we can see represented in the same episode by Jerzy Balowski (played by Alexei Sayle). Balowski enters the house without permission and demands his rent on the spot. In the final episode 'Summer Holiday,' Jerzy Balowski makes a reappearance for a surprise inspection. After charging exorbitantly for damages he caused (as well as an elephant mask left from a previous sketch), Balowski evicts the group for not having the money to pay for these 'damages.'

But most of the 'get rich quick' schemes featured on *The Young Ones* come from Mike 'the Cool Person.' In the episode 'Oil,' we see two examples of this. Firstly,

and Period Detail in *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* and the *Doctor Blake Mysteries*, *Screen Education* 71 (Spring 2013), 16–25; Katherine Byrne, 'Adapting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in *Downton Abbey*,' *Rethinking History* (2013).

- 8 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead": Film and the Challenge of Authenticity' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, 3 (1988), 274.
- 9 See: Evan Smith, 'History and the Notion of Authenticity in *Control* and *24 Hour Party People*,' *Contemporary British History* (2013).
- 10 Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible,' *Rethinking History* 14, 4 (December 2010), 506.
- 11 Ellis, 'Television and History,' 283.
- 12 Nigel Lawson, *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (London: Bantam Press, 1992), 64.
- 13 Stuart Hall, 'The Culture Gap,' *Marxism Today* (Jan 1984), 18.
- 14 Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain*, 202–203.
- 15 Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain*, 204.



ABOVE: Nuclear disarmament rally, Trafalgar Square, London, 1980.

Mike finds Buddy Holly hanging upside in his room, apparently being there since 1959. Mike quickly gets Holly to play a song, which he records on his cassette recorder and while Holly plays, Mike is seen calculating the money he would make from selling this new Holly song. Secondly, when Vyvyan discovers oil in the basement of the new house, Mike establishes himself as 'El Presidente' (a mixture of Arab dictator, such as Gadaffi, and Latin American *junta* leader) and owner of the oil's potential profits. Mike employs Vyvyan as his head of security and forces Rick and Neil to dig for the oil.

In the episode 'Bomb,' Mike also sees the potential of making money in selling the bomb they discover in the kitchen. Mike auctions the bomb among various criminal organisations and dictatorships – similar to what the Thatcher government were doing in their 'very permissible approach' to the arms trade in the 1980s.¹⁶ In one scene, Mike is seen trying to get hold of Colonel Gadaffi in Libya and in another he tells Neil that the CIA, the Mafia and the Chinese are all interested in purchasing the bomb.

One of the problems that the British left encountered under Thatcher was explaining why so many working-class and lower-middle-class people, who usually supported Labour, voted for the Tories between 1979 and 1992. One of the reasons that these sections of the British population may have voted for the Conservatives was that they believed in the rhetoric of self-sufficiency and 'rewarding' hard work, which Thatcher tapped into with her 'no such thing as

society' comments.¹⁷ This is addressed in *The Young Ones* when Rick talks about his father voting Tory in the episode 'Summer Holiday':

And Daddy, alright, so he's an old square. And maybe he does vote Tory. He's got where he is today by hard slog, and he's got to put tax concessions first.¹⁸

But while many working- and middle-class people endeavoured to make more money for themselves under Thatcherism, it was the super-wealthy that benefitted the most. *The Young Ones* parodies the influence and world outlook of this class in the episode 'Bambi' when the Cambridge Footlights come on *University Challenge* to 'smash the oiks'.¹⁹ The show recognised that as much as the Tories espoused trickle-down economics and popular capitalism as instigators of social mobility under Thatcher, it was still the wealthy that really benefitted from the advent of neo-liberalism, with the host of *University Challenge* saying in 'Bambi,' 'the posh kids win, they always do.'²⁰

Unemployment

'Unemployment haunted British culture in the early 1980s,' wrote Richard Vinen,²¹ and this is evident in *The Young Ones*. The Conservatives had campaigned in 1979 on the high level of unemployment under Labour, but it significantly increased under Thatcher during her first term in office. Ruth Levitas notes that when Thatcher entered 10 Downing St, the unemployment level was 1,299,300, but

16 Mark Phythian, "'Battling for Britain": British Arm Sales in the Thatcher Years,' *Crime, Law & Social Change* 26, 3 (1996/97), 271.

17 Interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Woman's Own*, 23 September, 1987, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, <http://bit.ly/1uEz9rX>.

18 'Summer Holiday,' episode 12, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

19 'Bambi,' episode 7, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

20 'Bambi,' episode 7, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

21 Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Political and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London: Pocket Books, 2010), 125.



ABOVE: Anti-Student Loans demonstration, London, November 1989.

by January 1982, it was three million.²² Remaining high until 1986, high unemployment was seen by the Thatcher government as a necessary evil and the price to be paid for curbing inflation.

In *The Young Ones*, unemployment was referred to in several episodes and became the focus of one episode ('Cash'), when the group decides that Neil needs to get a job, firstly to pay for food, then to provide for Vyvyan's impending baby. After looking through the 'situations vacant' section of the paper, it emerges that the only job advert is for the Army. The ad says:

JOIN THE PROFESHIONELS, IT'S GREAT! YOU CAN HAVE A GUN IF YOU WANT! AND THERE'S MONEY IN IT (NOT THE GUN). H.M. ARMED FORCES²³

'Cash' highlights the dire economic situation faced by many in Britain under Thatcher and the lack of suitable employment for many youth. The Army and the police were two state institutions that did not receive the same level of spending decreases as other government agencies under Thatcher and traditionally were avenues for those jobseekers with no qualifications or experience, so were seen as an option for many unemployed youth.

Racism and Police Harassment

The Young Ones debuted on British television in November 1982, just over a year after the large-scale inner-city riots that swept across Britain. The 1981 riots resulted in some of the biggest examples of urban unrest on the British mainland in the post-war period and resulted in millions of pounds in damage and several hundred arrests. Following the riots, Lord Scarman conducted an inquiry that found that relations

between the police and Britain's ethnic communities had broken down and while denying that institutional racism had infected the Metropolitan Police, the Police were susceptible to racist attitudes and behaviours. Scarman concluded that 'racial disadvantage and its nasty associate, racial discrimination' existed within the Metropolitan Police, but controversially declared: "institutional racism" does not exist in Britain.²⁴ Still, because of Scarman's findings, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 was introduced to regulate police procedures and a complaints body was established. The British Crime Survey, first instituted in 1982 and carried out biannually since then, found that people's ratings of the police decreased during the 1980s.²⁵ *The Young Ones* captured these attitudes towards the police and in several scenes, lampooned the racism and authoritarian attitudes of the police.

A direct satirisation of the racist attitudes of the police in the 1980s can be seen in the episode 'Boring,' in which a policeman comes up to a white man wearing black gloves, ringing the doorbell of the groups' flat. The policeman is also wearing sunglasses and from this, the policeman believes he is talking to a black person. The following exchange takes place:

COP: Ho ho ho. Hahahahaha. Well, Mr. Sambo Darkie Coon, I've got your number. You're nicked.

MAN: Is there anything the matter, officer?

COP: Ho ho ho, oh dear me. Don't we talk lovely, Mr. Rastus Chocolate Drop. Now listen here, son. I've done a weekend's training with the S.A.S. I could pull both your arms off and leave no trace of violence. Lord Scarman need never know.

22 Ruth Levitas, 'Fiddling while Britain Burns? The "Measurement" of Unemployment,' in Will Guy & Ruth Levitas (eds), *Interpreting Official Statistics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 44.

23 'Cash,' episode 8, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

24 L. Scarman, *The Scarman Report*, 209.

25 Krista Jansson, *British Crime Survey: Measuring Crime for 25 Years* (London: Home Office 2011), 21.

‘With contemporary shows such as *Mad Men*, *Downton Abbey* and *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* indulging in the recent past (spanning from the 1920s to the 1980s), we have seen discussion of historical representation, authenticity and how these shows coexist with popular memories of the eras.’

MAN: What seems to be the trouble, officer?

COP: That’s white man’s electricity you’re burnin’, ringin’ that bell. That’s theft. I’ve got your number, so hold out your hands.

MAN: Officer, I represent Kellogg’s Corn Flakes car competition. I – [*The COP removes his sunglasses and sees the man for the first time.*]

COP: Oh. Sorry, John. I thought you was a nigger. Now, Sir, carry on.²⁶

Note the threat that he could pull both the person’s arms off and ‘Lord Scarman need never know.’ Only when the person removes his gloves does the policeman realise his ‘error,’ then is polite to him. The clip satirises the difference in treatment experienced by white and non-white Britons.²⁷

Police harassment experienced by most youth in Britain in the 1980s was also satirised in several scenes, with the police depicted as quick to anger and using excessive force. In ‘Interesting,’ the police smash the record player when Rick starts playing music, while in ‘Sick’ a police officer hits Rick over the head for saying that they were sick of the police not being portrayed as ‘nice.’

While the show repeatedly parodied the police as authoritarian and ‘fascist’ (which many argued in the 1980s), the show also turns this concept on its head and satirises the idea of the police as ‘fascist’ by portraying the local police recruitment officer as Benito Mussolini. The surreal nature of Mussolini working for the Metropolitan Force emphasises the hyperbole involved in calling the police ‘fascist,’ a common occurrence by British youth and activists at the time.

While *The Young Ones* did highlight these issues, the cast of the show was almost entirely white. Probably the largest acting role given to an ethnic minority in the series was Lenny Henry’s cameo as a Nazi postman in the final episode ‘Summer Holiday.’ *The Young Ones* highlighted attitudes among

British youth towards the police in the 1980s, which had been severely damaged because of the 1981 riots, and portrayed the police as racist, authoritarian and quick to use violence against those who they disliked. The police were also portrayed as unintelligent. At the same time, the show parodied the left’s attitudes towards the police (and other issues of ‘race’) through Rick’s pompousness, although most would agree that the show’s sympathies lay with the opposition to Thatcherism in the 1980s.

Activism and the British Left in the 1980s

Clearly *The Young Ones* most often critiqued Thatcherism from a left-of-centre position. However, that did not mean that the show did not also criticise the left, with many jokes made about the self-importance of the left (particularly of the student left) and the left’s delusions of grandeur. The self-important revolutionary had already been parodied in the late 1970s with Robert Lindsay’s *Citizen Smith* and the Tooting Popular Front, and Rick in *The Young Ones* used many similar tropes. But Rick was a younger, student-y version and as much as Rick ‘talked the talk’ of the lefty stereotype, there is hardly any moment in either series where Rick actually partakes in any political activity. Rick liked to see himself as a ‘guru’ for the left, a figure that ‘the kids’ could look up to – going as far as to call himself ‘the People’s Poet.’ Although Rick had recited poetry in the first series already in episodes ‘Demolition’ and ‘Bomb,’ the ‘People’s Poet’ is introduced in the episode ‘Flood,’ where Rick recites poetry at the police to stop them harassing young people. The ‘People’s Poem’ as recited by Rick goes:

What do you think you’re doing, pig?

Do you really give a fig, pig?

And what’s your favourite sort of gig, pig?

Barry Manilow? Or the Black and White Minstrel Show?²⁸

26 ‘Boring,’ episode 3, *The Young Ones*, 1982.

27 This satire caused controversy when it first aired, with producer Jackson feeling that the joke was lost on many people who thought it pandered to racism. The scene was cut from subsequent broadcasts. See: Roger Wilmut & Peter Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live* (London: Methuen, 1989).

28 ‘Flood,’ episode 6, *The Young Ones*, 1982.

‘The show works as an excellent demonstration of the zeitgeist of Britain under Margaret Thatcher. At the same time, it is factually inaccurate and stakes no claim to historical authenticity.’

In Rick’s dream, the power of his words is enough to physically defeat the police.

In addition to this image of himself as ‘the People’s Poet’ and the fantasy of being revolutionary figure, we also see that Rick was quite accustomed to namedropping revolutionary figures into conversation. In ‘Interesting,’ he invites his tutor to the party so they can discuss Trotsky, while in ‘Bambi,’ he mentions that Lenin probably had a dirty bottom when he led the October revolution. But when confronted with the opportunity to partake in ‘revolutionary’ activity, such as the anarchist bombing of a police car, Rick is unsure of this, as seen in this exchange in the episode ‘Interesting’:

RICK: Hi, Fisher. What do you want to know? Better be ready for some pretty angry vibes!

ANARCHIST: Political activist, eh? Ah, what’s the last thing you blew up?

RICK: Well, I blew up a rubber johnny actually in the union bar. It was hilarious – everybody thought so.

ANARCHIST: Yeah. Look, next Tuesday, I’m gonna blow up a Panda in Croydon.

RICK: Yer, right on. Bloody zoos, who needs them?

ANARCHIST: No, a police car, you terminal wally!

RICK: [Nervously] Oh, the – the pigs?

ANARCHIST: Bastards

RICK: Yeah [Snort] Especially the few bad apples that spoil their otherwise spotless image.

ANARCHIST: Yer, if pigs could fly, Scotland Yard would be London’s third airport! [He laughs, Rick looks confused] I’ve got everything ready. All I need is a plan, a bomb and a dedicated and ruthless accomplice. Are you in?²⁹

The only time that we really see Rick involved in kind of political activity is in the episode ‘Bomb’ when he tries to use the bomb to convince Thatcher to implement radical social policies, in which he demands:

Point one: Abolish poverty! Point Two: Abolish capitalism. Point Three: Dexy’s Midnight Runners playing free, daily, in the University library!³⁰

In contrast with Rick’s stereotype of the student lefty type, the left is also satirised through Alexei Sayle’s piece to camera parts in the series. As discussed in his autobiography *Stalin Ate My Homework*, Sayle came from a Communist family and was brought up in the 1950s and 1960s as a devout young Communist.³¹ Sayle makes fun of his Communist heritage in ‘Oil’ when the character he is playing says that his middle name is ‘Yuri Gagarin Siege of Stalingrad Glorious Five-Year Plan Sputnik Pravda Moscow Dynamo Back Four,’ as his dad ‘was a bit of a Communist.’³²

In the episode ‘Nasty,’ Sayle, breaking from character, laments the problems of being a Marxist comedian and not being respected by other Marxists, who in the 1970s and early 1980s still had aversions to popular culture:

But you see, the worst thing about television is: you see, I’m a Marxist comedian, you know, but . . . since I’ve been doing television, a lot of me Marxist friends have accused me of selling out, you know. Like they make me march at the back on demos. They’re all selling the *Socialist Worker*, and I’ve got to sell the *TV Times*. So I’d just like to take this opportunity, on national television, to assure you all, comrades, that honest to God, I have NOT, sold out.³³

But the enthusiasm for youth culture to motivate political activism in British youth was most explicitly parodied in the episode ‘Oil’ with the concert to support the ‘oppressed worker of the house’ Neil. Rick gets the band Radical Posture to play a gig in the drawing room of the house and plans that at the height of the gig, the masses would rise up, liberate Neil and overthrow Mike’s domestic dictatorship. However, Neil is the only audience member and has to pay the £500 to ensure the gig goes ahead. Sayle, as Radical Posture’s singer Alexei Balowski, further parodies the recent enthusiasm for youth culture

29 ‘Interesting,’ episode 5, *The Young Ones*, 1982.

30 ‘Bomb,’ episode 4, *The Young Ones*, 1982.

31 Alexei Sayle, *Stalin Ate My Homework* (London: Sceptre, 2010).

32 ‘Oil,’ episode 2, *The Young Ones*, 1982.

33 ‘Nasty,’ episode 9, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

by the British left, singing that the only thing that would bring people together was Dr Marten's boots.

It seems that while *The Young Ones* can be largely seen as 'progressive' and an exemplar of 'alternative comedy,' critiquing Thatcherite Britain, it also was not afraid of sending up those on the left – seen by many as self-important and overconfident. But while Rick's character openly satirises the student left, Sayle's routines about Marxism were from a much more friendly and sympathetic position.

Higher Education and Class

One of the major themes of the show that needs to be addressed in this paper is the topic of higher education and class in the 1980s. *The Young Ones* was essentially about four university students living in a share house in London, amid the class warfare from the neo-liberals under Thatcher. Higher education in Britain had exploded between the 1960s and the 1980s. Due to the post-war baby boom and the expansion of the welfare state into the realm of tertiary education, many more young people attended universities or polytechnics. The radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s is synonymous in the public's memory with the student revolution inside the universities, whose numbers had swelled dramatically. Traditionally universities had been a training ground for the elite tier of British society, with very few lower-middle-class or working-class people being able to enter the higher education system. Peter A. Hall wrote that prior to higher education reforms, 'the experience of higher education was restricted to the male children from the upper-middle class.'³⁴ But with the system being opened in the 1960s, increasing numbers of lower-middle-class and working-class youth entered the world of higher education and for most, this was the first generation to have a university education.

This is reflected in *The Young Ones*. We see that Vyvyan can attend medical school despite his mother being a shoplifter (and later a bartender). Rick talks about his family being working-class Tory voters. Only Neil seems to come from a more privileged background. In the episode 'Sick,' we see Neil's parents visit, who complain about the living conditions of the students

and their crassness (comparing them unfavourably with the middle-class humour of *The Good Life*). Neil's mother deplores:

You have brought shame on your family, Neil. I daren't show my face at Lady Fanshaw's bridge evenings, now that you've taken up with these television people. I mean, what kind of monsters are you?³⁵

To which Vyvyan replies:

NO! No! We're not watching the bloody *Good Life*! Bloody bloody bloody! I hate it! It's so bloody nice! Felicity 'Treacle' Kendall and Richard 'Sugar-Flavored-Snot' Briars! What do they do now?! Chocolate bloody Button ads, that's what! They're just a couple of reactionary stereotypes, confirming the myth that everyone in Britain is a lovable, middle-class eccentric – and I – HATE – THEM!³⁶

Rupa Huq has argued that '[t]he point being made by Vivian [sic] ... is that there is a mismatch between the suburban niceness we are invited to view on *The Good Life* and the harsher reality of modern Britain,'³⁷ which was reflected in new television shows like *The Young Ones*. In her book, *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture*, Huq has shown that British television, particularly sitcoms, had focused on the suburbs and these had traditionally been portrayed as 'entirely white, middle class and conservative.'³⁸ *The Young Ones* was different in that it highlighted the gap between the middle and working classes, particularly as experienced by students living in Thatcher's London.

The show reflects the opening the higher education system to a wider degree of socio-economic backgrounds in the 1980s. But the show also reminded viewers that the odds were still stacked against university students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with the elite, predominantly with an Oxbridge education, still coming out on top in the higher education system. Jo Blanden and Stephen Machin have shown that in 1981, '20 percent of children from the top income quintile had a degree by age 23, whereas the comparable number was only 6 percent in the bottom quintile.'³⁹ Degree acquisition was important as 'it is well documented that graduates earn more than non-graduates and that this wage differential has widened in the

34 Peter A. Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain,' *British Journal of Political Science* 29, 3 (June 1999), 436.

35 'Sick,' episode 11, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

36 'Sick,' episode 11, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

37 Rupa Huq, *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 199.

38 Huq, *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture*, 113.

39 Jo Blanden & Stephen Machin, 'Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education,' conference paper delivered to Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics, 19 March 2004, 11, available online: <http://bit.ly/1uBUqU4>.

recent past, especially in the 1980s.⁴⁰ Blanden and Machin conclude that higher education ‘expansion has not been equally distributed across people from richer and poorer backgrounds. Rather, it has disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families.’⁴¹

In the episode ‘Bambi,’ Alexei Sayle, as a train driver held up by Mexican bandits, jokes about this inequality in degree acquisition and job prospects:

I never really wanted to be a train driver, you know. I mean, they told me while at school, if I got two CSEs, when I left school I’d be head of British Steel. That’s a lot of nonsense, innit? I mean, you look at statistics, right. 83% of top British management have been to a public school and Oxbridge, right? 93% of the BBC have been to a public school and Oxbridge, right? 98% of the KGB have been to a public school and Oxbridge.⁴²

The same episode involves the four housemates taking on the Cambridge Footlights on *University Challenge*, highlighting the difference between the elites that attended one of the Oxbridge universities and the rest. The Footlights team was played by real Footlights alumni, with Stephen Fry as Lord Snot, Hugh Laurie as Lord Monty and Emma Thompson as Miss Money-Sterling. The Footlights team indulged in many of the stereotypes of the ruling class (similar myths abound about the Bullingdon Club and Britain’s current ruling elite), such as nepotism to obtain positions of influence (and answers to *University Challenge*), buying off influence (and answers to *University Challenge*) and extreme confidence in their elite position.

Conclusion

In 2005, Lawrence Black wrote that, ‘Historians . . . might prosper from spending more time watching television and less time sitting in judgement on it.’⁴³ This article proposes that historians of contemporary Britain would be well served by watching the ‘alternative’ sitcom of the early 1980s, *The Young Ones* and use it as a framework for looking at how Thatcherite Britain was experienced and represented. The

title of this article asks the question ‘what can *The Young Ones* teach us about Thatcherism’ and the answer is that it can teach us quite a lot about the popularly recognisable symbols of the era, portrayed in an extreme way through the show. This article has specifically highlighted issues – such as police racism, unemployment, greed and popular capitalism, student activism, sexism, the social stratification in higher education and the disparities in the class system – as evident in *The Young Ones* and based on (then satirised to absurd proportions) the experience of young people in Britain under the Prime Ministership of Margaret Thatcher.

Importantly, we recognise, as historians, that *The Young Ones* does not portray a ‘real’ account of student life in 1980s Britain, but portrays easily recognisable symbols of Thatcherite Britain – the overtly aggressive police, the lack of employment options, the ‘get rich quick’ geezer, the sociology student interested in Trotsky, the snobbery of Oxbridge alumni. These symbols, as portrayed in the show, have some basis in historical fact, but are so parodied that one cannot substitute the televisual portrayal for the historical artefact. *The Young Ones* does not show Thatcherite Britain as it really was, but highlights the concerns and opinions of a certain section of the British population (primarily young adults and students) who were, for the first time essentially, making a headway in British television and popular culture more widely. ‘The whole point of Thatcherism as a form of politics,’ Stuart Hall wrote in 1987, ‘has been to construct a new social bloc’;⁴⁴ in other words, a seismic shift in the British political and social landscape. *The Young Ones* offers us an insight into how these seismic shifts were popularly perceived, parodied from the ‘margins of society’ as the Thatcherite hegemony was established. As Janine Utell wrote, ‘[o]ne laughs, but one realises at the same time that [the creators of *The Young Ones*] are responding to profound ruptures and transformations in society.’⁴⁵

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40 Blanden & Machin, ‘Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education,’ 20.

41 Ibid., 22.

42 ‘Bambi,’ episode 7, *The Young Ones*, 1984.

43 Lawrence Black, ‘Whose Finger on the Button? British Television, and the Politics of Cultural Control,’ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, 4 (October 2005), 548.

44 Stuart Hall, ‘Blue Election, Election Blues,’ *Marxism Today* (July 1987), 33.

45 Utell, ‘Negotiating Dissent,’ 153.